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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000277

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SUBJECT: REEF CHIEF ENVIRONMENTAL NGO ANNOUNCES FARASAN
ISLANDS EXPEDITION

REF: A. JEDDAH 270 B. JEDDAH 106 C. 05 JEDDAH 4928

11. SUMMARY: On April 4, Pol/Econ Chief attended a meeting of the environmental NGO "Reef Chief" sponsored by a local business leader, Tarek Taher. Taher described his organization's structure and links to organizations and individuals and announced an expedition, conducted in cooperation with Saudi and regional authorities, to survey and film the marine environment of the Farasan Islands. The organization seems very much a product of Mr. Taher's personal interest. Local environmental awareness and involvement appears to be very limited at this time. END SUMMARY.

FRIENDS OF REEF CHIEF MEETING

12. On April 4, Pol/Econ Chief attended the "1st Reef Chief Global Friends Meeting" at the expensively appointed offices of founder Tarek Taher's business headquarters in a fashionable Tahlia Street high-rise in Jeddah. The meeting was called on short notice and there were, in addition to Taher and his staff, Mr. Abdullah Al-Suhaibani from the Regional Organization for the Conservation of the Environment of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (PERSGA), a visiting female Italian journalist reporting on Saudi business and economy, and four female instructors from Effat College in Jeddah. Taher described the development of his organization and the links he had developed. He enumerated his contacts with Saudi and regional environmental officials, including the Presidency for Meteorology and Environment (PME), PERSGA, the Supreme Commission for Tourism (SCT) and colleges such as Effat College, Abdul Aziz University and the American University of Cairo (AUC). He has forged relations with a number of other groups and individuals ranging as far afield as the German Consul General in Jeddah, King's College London, University of California at Berkeley, and companies from Singapore to Washington, D.C. He has also enlisted at least nominal support from recent visitor to Jeddah, former Vice President Al Gore, and another philanthropist interested in the maritime environment, American movie director James Cameron.

FARASAN ISLANDS EXPEDITION

13. At the meeting, Taher announced his newly formed NGO's first major activity. He related that during May, he would film the third and final segment of his personal documentary

film "The Red Sea, My Planet" (reftel A) in the Farasan Islands. (Note: The Farasan Islands are located on a shallow coastal shelf just north of the Saudi-Yemeni border. Reftel B. End Note.) Filming will be carried out in concert with an expedition to survey the Farasan Islands being conducted by PERSGA, PME, the Living Oceans Foundation, sponsored by Prince Khaled bin Sultan, AUC, and Effat College. A number of other ships and aircraft will be utilized to carry out the survey. They hope to map the marine and reef environments utilizing a Compact Airborne Spectrographic Imager (CASI) system as a prelude to a comprehensive survey of the areas habitats and biodiversity.

PUBLIC OUTREACH AND EDUCATION

14. In addition to filming the expedition, Taher and his companions will be conducting much of the public outreach associated with this expedition. Saudi environmental officials are acutely aware of the importance of developing public appreciation of environmental preservation (reftel C). Both Reef Chief and Living Oceans Foundation will have on-line updates of the expedition as it proceeds. Effat College is promoting environmental studies at the college level and producing materials for schools. Taher's group will make a special effort to interact with schools on the Farasan Islands themselves. PERSGA and PME intend to utilize the event in their public and school education campaigns to educate the Saudi public about this unique environment. The Saudi sponsored environmental clubs at schools will also be involved.

LITTLE PUBLIC ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

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15. COMMENT: It is apparent that Mr. Taher has committed substantial personal and financial resources to this cause, has developed wide contacts and is willingly guided by local and international experts. Maintaining contact with Mr. Taher should be beneficial for the Consulate's mission of promoting environmental progress. He may be a powerful advocate for future environmental initiatives in Saudi Arabia. He could also be a good example of what interested businessmen can contribute to the environmental dialogue in their countries.

16. Of concern, however, is the fact that the Reef Chief organization is very much Mr. Taher's organization, and it is questionable how long it would survive if business or personal considerations turned his attention elsewhere. Also discouraging was the fact that the "Friends of Reef Chief" were all scientists and foreigners. All of the Saudi scientists that Pol/Econ Chief has meet exhibit a commendable dedication to environmental improvement and the foreigners involved in this and other activities are similarly committed, however popular Saudi interest and involvement is lagging. The apparent lack of public involvement is surprising, considering the importance of diving and marine recreational and economic activities in the Jeddah area. The efforts of PME and Reef Chief to promote environmental awareness are essential to fostering public awareness and should be encouraged and assisted, if feasible. ENDCOMMENT
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